

BLOOM WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED

WORKING IN THE FEDERAL SYSTEM

Barbara J. Little

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I was not one of those kids who “always” wanted to be an archaeologist. In junior and senior high school, I had a vague interest in anthropology, but that was due more to Margaret Mead’s impact on popular culture than any understanding of what such a career might entail. I had no idea that my future included working as an archeologist in the Washington office of the National Park Service.

I was more interested in architecture when I entered college at Penn State, but after being told by an architecture professor that “women don’t make good architects,” I decided to look for another path. (This was in 1978, but such attitudes are still very much alive, even if expressed more subtly.)

Finding archaeology was somewhat of an accident. I had a great apartment in State College and I wanted to keep it over the summer rather than returning home to Pottstown, Pennsylvania for another stint of factory work as a United Auto Worker. An archaeological field school offered in the summer, organized so that we’d shuttle back and forth daily, seemed the perfect thing. I took the prerequisite course and signed up for my adventure.

That summer showed me an academic major offering what I found compelling. I was conscious at the time of how extraordinary it would be to have a career that so blended physical and intellectual demands: the hand and the head. It was years later that I came to realize it is also a matter of the heart: of commitment and passion.

Many people influenced my career, some quite intentionally and some accidentally, I’m sure. I can’t begin to name all such individuals. Everyone I have run into is a mentor in some way, and many of my students were some of my best teachers. Except by passing them along to others, I can never repay the many kindnesses extended to me. I have received my share of both bad and good advice; whether I have sorted it out appropriately I don’t imagine I’ll ever know.

When I decided to go to graduate school, I didn’t have any career path in mind other than as a professor and so I didn’t make choices with any idea of becoming a federal archaeologist. Even so, I became prepared for my current position through coursework and experience. I majored in Anthropology for my B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. In addition, I took an undergraduate minor in the interdisciplinary field of Science, Technology, and Society. Through lucky exposure to feminist scholarship, I learned about the personal, political, and social context of science and the basic skills of critique and self-critique that, I believe, are essential to honest scholarship.

What I didn’t learn in the academic setting is, of course, enormous. My memories of the wasted time learning the details of quickly extinct computer languages (FORTRAN, anyone?) says to me that formal educational time should be spent on teaching critical thinking, research design, analytical concepts, constructing a convincing argument, and skillful writing and speaking. Those kinds of skills persist and are transferable.

Learning the academic habit of researching and learning what I need to know is one of the most important lessons of rigorous academics. Such personal responsibility and initiative is absolutely necessary in my current job and has been in every job I’ve held. I track my own introduction to critical thinking to extraordinary fifth- and sixth-grade teachers who were not so much “tellers” as “askers” in the classroom, thereby instilling a sense of intellectual responsibility.

I believe that being educated as an anthropologist gave me at least the basic tools to negotiate a bureaucracy effectively and dispassionately. With the guiding principles of participant observation and the ability to observe, I can regard every day as an opportunity for fieldwork rather than an opportunity for insanity and (often, if not always) keep a sense of wonder, even amid the frequent frustrations.

In my current job, I draw on all, or nearly all, of my previous related job experience. My previous jobs (not including retail) included contract work, part-time teaching, full-time academic positions, and working in the *Archaeology in Annapolis* project, which was academic- rather than compliance-based. Academic jobs require complete abandonment of a nine-to-five attitude and openness to pulling together ideas from anywhere and everywhere: one must abandon the boundaries. Although I taught for several years, I never had the opportunity of a tenure-track position and I had to adjust my career expectations.

I'm currently in the national archaeology program office in the National Park Service, but having worked in one of our regional offices is invaluable to me daily. The same is true of having worked in the National Register and National Historic Landmark programs.

I am grateful for opportunities that I have had. For example, very early in my career, I agreed to serve on the Maryland State Review Board for the National Register of Historic Places. It was not with the intention that it would have much to do with any future job, but to learn something new and to serve the state and profession. This was an unexpected opportunity that turned out to be very valuable professionally. The National Register was not something I learned about in graduate school, in spite of actually working on compliance projects.

My current position is the third for me in the National Park Service. I started out in a term position (four-year maximum) as an archeologist in the National Capital Region. After three years, I transferred to the Washington office to be the archeologist for the National Register of Historic Places. If I hadn't had the experience on the state review board, I don't know that I'd have been chosen for that job. After I was there for a year, I had to apply for my job, and I became a federal employee with permanent status.

I learned a lot in that position and did my best to make the process of evaluation more transparent. I found that I had to intellectualize the process so that I could both understand it

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Working at home reading an National Park Service document about civic engagement initiatives. Photo by Paul Shackel.

and translate it, because the registration process is not often something adequately taught in either undergraduate or graduate curricula for archaeologists and it is not an obvious outgrowth of the intellectual traditions of our discipline. I say this because the demands of any workplace require adjustment and creativity, not only socially and culturally but also intellectually, even if one thinks that "archaeology" is the common denominator.

I was very glad to be able to expand the National Register bulletin on archaeology to cover archeology as a whole rather than only historical archaeology. When I arrived, I took over organizing the Public Benefits of Archaeology conference held in 1995, less than five months after I started; that was a whirlwind with long-reaching implications for my NPS work.

I was fortunate to be able to transfer to the Archeology Program in 1999 to focus on outreach and education efforts, but with many other duties as well. It's difficult to pin down what a typical day is like, although the common denominator is the full-speed-ahead pace. Most days include meetings, some sort of review of some document and email, email, and then more email.

The formal categories of my duties have somewhat fuzziy boundaries than the bureaucracy recognizes, but all relate to our current NPS Director's four main priorities: Relevance, Education, Stewardship, and Workforce, which form a pretty compelling mix.

A day might contain the following:

- checking in with interns and consultants for updates on specific projects;
- reviewing and commenting on a proposed policy change, a draft directive, new materials for our web site, or a draft report;
- discussing the details of our interagency agreement with the Department of State;
- writing and editing briefings, justifications, accomplishment reports, or substantive reports;
- working with an author or reviewer for *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship*, of which I am Editor;
- responding to requests from any of a myriad of NPS offices, such as our Office of International Affairs about archaeology and world heritage;
- dealing with the unexpected that comes in the door; and, of course, meetings.

Whether in person or via conference call, meetings are legion. I might participate in a meeting with our cultural resources web team, archaeologists in the parks and regions, the Cooperative Ecosystems Studies Units national network, the NPS National Education Council, informal team meetings, individual meetings, project-specific meetings, staff meetings, union chapter meetings, and more. When not in a meeting, I'm often following up on issues identified in a meeting.

And then, for a break, I have a lunch meeting (!), such as participating in our internal monthly—and energizing—civic engagement luncheon where folks from different program areas talk about their efforts and challenges with effective civic engagement, which moves beyond short-term legal requirements of public involvement to build and strengthen relationships between the agency and communities. (Take a look at our technical brief: <http://www.cr.nps.gov/archeology/pubs/techBr/tch23.htm>.)

This job is both challenging and rewarding. Our office shares challenges of budget and staffing that are common everywhere. My personal challenges include effective time management and prioritizing and, most importantly for my own professional identity, balancing my job with my professional writing. A career in public service means that I have to give up some things. Sometimes I've been able to connect my own active writing with my job, but it's often indirect. My professional writing is done on my own time, not on NPS time, and that means that I have learned how to work fast.

This job is rewarding, particularly when I can see positive results from our efforts. One of the most personally significant for me is helping people move along in their careers through our internship program. I enjoy being in a position where I can help someone create something useful for both a developing career and for the NPS.

In thinking about the advice I'd offer to someone contemplating a similar career in archaeology, my first response is to learn a lot and keep learning. Archaeology is an extraordinarily diversified practice and all of it is useful or valuable or worth considering in some way. There is no advantage in being dismissive of any research interest or theoretical stance or applicable skill. In particular, bureaucratic and administrative skills are overlooked and undervalued, unless you happen to witness them and then you know that Barry Kemp was absolutely right about the importance of bureaucracy to the success of Egyptian civilization!

Take a look at the application to become a Registered Professional Archaeologist: <http://www.rpanet.org/index.cfm>, but add on your own specialization to become qualified broadly. It's especially important to be able to understand and articulate why something archaeological matters to anyone other than an archaeologist. One good bit of practice for this is to nominate a property for the National Register of Historic Places and to clearly and competently define significance (<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/>).

Consider what you value for yourself—as broadly as possible—and don't work against your own values or you will burn out very quickly. Follow the Golden Rule. Be helpful; be part of a team or, when necessary, go it alone. Go ahead and take risks—be bold, be courageous and also be humble, too, and willing to be wrong and learn from it and change what you're doing or thinking or saying. I think it's very important to seek out trusted colleagues to read and critically evaluate your work. And then listen to the critique; that doesn't mean you have to do everything they suggest, but really be willing to listen and learn. It's true that you can be your own worst critic, but couple that with being your own best friend. Follow the opportunities and bloom where you're planted.

I cannot offer any better parting advice but to quote Wendell Berry in this line from his poem, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," (in *The Country of Marriage*, 1973): Be joyful, though you've considered all the facts.